DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 326 870 CS 212 582

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TITLE Comparative Narrative: Jesus across the Centuries.
PUB DATE Nov 90
NOTE 6p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (80th, Atlanta, GA, November 16-21, 1990).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Guides - Classroom Use - Guides (For Teachers) (052)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Art Appreciation; Christianity; *Cultural Influences; Film Study; Higher Education; Honors Curriculum; *Interdisciplinary Approach; *Literary Criticism; Literary Devices; Literature Appreciation; Music Appreciation; *Reader Response
IDENTIFIERS Bloomsburg University PA; *Jesus Christ

ABSTRACT

An honors seminar at Bloomsburg University (Pennsylvania) investigated the story of Jesus as it has evolved in different media over nearly two millennia. Initially the students studied two gospels with contrasting versions of the life of Jesus, in order to explore the process whereby oral material is transcribed into written form by different authors with different purposes for different audiences. The next stage of the course examined late medieval drama. Of special concern were the strategies script writers used to adapt the story of Jesus to the local language and customs for an essentially illiterate audience. Italian Renaissance art was the next focus of the seminar. Decorative art and iconology revealed how painters often depicted several episodes of the same story in a single picture and how muralists dealt with the problem that narrative moves across time while visual art captures a precise moment. The next area examined was Baroque oratorio. Students listened to recordings and learned how the composers used tones, rhythms, keys, instrumentation, and voices to present the Jesus story in a highly emotional way. The final segment of the course examined contemporary renderings of the life of Christ in narrative and film. Guest lecturers and professors of English, art, music, film, and media participated throughout the seminar. The study of the story of Jesus culminated with an independent study project and a field trip to tour Washington National Cathedral and attend a service there. (Twenty references are attached.) (KEH)

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Comparative Narrative: Jesus Across the Centuries

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Two current concerns in education seem in almost absolute conflict. On the one hand cultural custodians like Allan Bloom and E.D. Hirsch lament many young people's ignorance of traditional Western literature and values. On the other hand, proponents of media literacy like Len Masterman and Raymond Williams argue that young people do not comprehend critically the burgeoning electronic and film media that constitute so much of their cultural environment. What I describe here is an effort to address both concerns in a positive manner.

The occasion was a Fall, 1987, opportunity to teach an Arts and Science Honors Seminar at Bloomsburg University, one of fourteen institutions that comprise Pennsylvania's State System of Higher Education. The students included majors drawn from such fields as art, mass communications, English, history, and foreign languages, plus, by chance, sociology. In age they included traditional and non-traditional students. The majority were female. All were preparing to undertake an independent study project in their major the following semester.

I had just recently returned from a sabbatical year at the Institute of Education of the University of London where I had participated in the associates program in the Department of English and Media Studies. A term, "comparative narrative," that I had coined as a consequence of this experience was teasing me in terms of how I might implement it, and the Honors Seminar gave me the opportunity. In my proposal to the supervising committee I outlined a course in which the students would study the story of Jesus as it has evolved in different media over nearly two millennia. (Other central Western stories that I considered were those of Moses, Helen of Troy, and Odysseus. Persons from other cultural traditions might employ figures like Muhammad, Buddha, et. al.) Jesus, however, appealed to me particularly as I had a long-standing interest in novelizations of his life. In addition, since most, if not all, of the students came from a range of Christian backgrounds, I thought that each would have unique insights to bring to the subject in terms of current reader response theory. Moreover, there were a number of Bloomsburg faculty available in the Departments of English, Art, and Music who could comment expertly on various media renderings of the Jesus story. By chance, an exchange in the Protestant campus ministry brought to campus a New Zealand Biblical scholar who was eager to participate in the early sessions.

This is how the seminar progressed. The summer before I gave the students a background reading list that included Howard Gardner's Frames of Mind, Patricia Marks Greenfield's Mind and Media, the gospels of Matthew and John, and Nikos Kazantzakis' The Last Temptation of Christ. The reason was that I wanted the seminar to start without delay at the first meeting. (I also asked them to read Raymond Williams' Culture, but shipping difficulties delayed arrival of the book until late in the semester.) Initially the students studied the two gospels. My first concern was that the students become familiar with two contrasting versions of the life of Jesus. This allowed us to

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explore the process whereby oral material is transcribed into written form by different authors with different purposes for different audiences. An English Department colleague who teaches a course in the Bible as literature, plus the New Zealand visitor, led these sessions. Of crucial concern was that the students grasp the impermanence of the oral medium and the desire of the gospel writers to preserve the accounts of witnesses to the life of Jesus. Moreover, this part of the course raised interesting questions about how works become part of a canon and about how translation affects meaning as Greek texts, based on the life of a person who spoke Aramaic, are rendered into English.

The next stage of the course turned to late medieval drama, a discussion led by an English Department specialist on the subject. This study focused on the various British plays that were performed on carts in the streets of York and other cities during major holy periods. The Second Shepherds' Pageant from Wakefield and The Crucifixion of Christ from York were the main texts studied. Of special concern were the ways in which the script writers adopted the story of Jesus to the local language and customs. We stressed the ways in which the plays, often anachronistically, educated an essentially illiterate audience in the central story of their faith. In addition, we considered how live drama works as a medium in terms of gesture, voice, costumes, blocking, etc. to tell a story. Besides printed scripts, the students heard an audio recording of a play. Unfortunately, we were not able to see a live or filmed performance of any of these plays. However, an adjunct faculty member who had produced one as a dissertation project participated in the seminar session.

Italian Renaissance art was the next focus of the seminar. Here we concentrated on the decorative art of Italian churches like the Sistine Chapel where series of wall panels illustrate Biblical stories, including the life of Jesus. Of special concern to the member of the Art Department who led this discussion was how muralists dealt with the problem that narrative moves across time while visual art captures a precise moment. In her slide presentation, the faculty member showed how the painters often depicted several episodes of the same story in a single picture. Viewers of the painting would often find their eyes moving through the portrayed scenes in the order of occurrence. Thus, the birth of Jesus, the adoration of the Magi, and the flight into Egypt might appear in one panel, or in a triptych. Of importance, too, was a knowledge of iconic symbols associated with a particular portion of the story. For example, a picture of a man being bathed would refer to the baptism of Jesus by John the Baptist if a dove or shaft of light appeared above the bather's head and the person pouring water was a wild looking man dressed in animal skins.

The seminar next studied examples of Baroque oratorio, J.S. Bach's St. Matthew Passion and G.F. Handel's Messiah, to comprehend musical narrative. Under the leadership of a music faculty member, the students listened to recordings of both works and learned how the composers used tones, rhythms, keys, instrumentation, and voices to present the Jesus story in a highly emotional way. (Here the students' familiarity with such recent musicals as Godspell and Jesus Christ Superstar was

helpful if for no other reason than the contrasts and, interestingly, the similarities.) The faculty member also described the circumstances under which each was performed, Bach's as part of church liturgy, Handel's in a secular auditorium.

The modern renderings of the Jesus story concentrated on two versions--Kazantzakis' The Last Temptation of Christ and Pasolini's film The Gospel According to St. Matthew. In the study of Kazantzakis' novel I emphasized several factors--the author's first-hand knowledge of Mediterranean peasant life, his intellectual grasp of modern Biblical scholarship that through archeological and textual study has shed light on First Century Palestinian life, and his knowledge of modern psychological theory. Thus, the novel goes into considerable detail about the daily life of Jesus and his compatriots, provides considerable background information about the times, and concentrates on Jesus as a man highly tempted by his sexual instincts. In addition, I focused on the novel as genre, especially Kazantzakis' use of Jesus as his point-of-view character. (The Jesus of the gospels is mostly seen from the outside as other's saw and heard him.) I also pointed out how other novelists like Robert Graves and Sholem Asch had built on comparable material but constructed radically different novels of Jesus's life. (One footnote: when Scorcese's film version of The Last Temptation of Christ appeared soon afterwards, these students were among the few who could compare the novel to the film. My own reaction is that the film is decidedly inferior to the novel.)

The study of the film emphasized the concepts of layering and montage. Led by an English Department colleague, the students analyzed how sound track, a mix of shots, and dialogue are edited to create a flowing narration. Adding linguistic interest was the fact that we analyzed the Italian version of The Gospel According to St. Matthew. Thus, even though no one spoke Italian, we did not have the often jarring contradiction between dubbed voices and the visual speakers' emphasis. The film also made the students aware of the power of black-and-white films to create dramatic impact greater than color versions. Of special interest was the director's use of southern Italian villages and villagers as his setting and actors and the stress on Jesus as a social reformer. Unfortunately, we did not view any other filmed versions of the life of Jesus. Such study would have permitted analysis through contrast.

The study of the story of Jesus culminated with a field trip to Washington, D.C., where the students attended a service and toured Washington National Cathedral. The intent was to let them experience a synthesis of media in an architectural setting. The cathedral combines Gothic concepts of space with the drama of liturgy, the art of sculpture, mosaic, and stained glass, the music of choir, organ, and congregation, and the written and spoken word to tell the story of Jesus. As an aesthetic experience it is intended to overwhelm the believer and non-believer alike with the majesty and power of the story of Jesus, the focal point of the cathedral being a statue of Christ in Judgment above the high altar.

By the end of the seminar the students, and their leader, certainly had a better idea of how a variety of media tell stories. This led to a final set of projects in which the

students undertook independent study of story telling in different media. Among the analytical projects completed were comparisons of the film and novel versions of Gone With the Wind, the comic strip, novel, stage and film versions of Annie, artists' renderings of the Stations of the Cross in Roman Catholic churches, Shakespeare's Richard III and a modern novel based on historical evidence of the king's life, and oral and print versions of poems. In addition, students prepared creative projects involving story telling. Among the submissions were a day in the life of a fire company, a cartoon version of a battle between a cat and a mouse, a collage telling the story of the seminar itself, a diary of an 18th Century Scots soldier, a mystery game complete with props and written text, a case study of a boy's life in foster care, and a family history built on oral reminiscences.

Thus, by the end of the course I felt the students had a much better concept of how different media construct stories. In addition they had a first-hand knowledge of a story that is central to Western thinking about the role of human beings in life on planet Earth.

My major regret is that I have not been able to replicate this course. Unlike a typical college course, the seminar had a budget that let me purchase films and arrange field trips and visiting speakers. However, the lessons I learned from it have affected my teaching of other classes. Oral story telling, filmed versions of stories, contrasting versions of the same story, staged scripts--all need to be part of a student's learning experience. Certainly the popularity of tele vision, films, and audio recordings among students suggest that they enjoy story telling. We only have to converse with them to hear their enjoyment of telling stories about themselves and friends and families. Perhaps if we refocus our traditional concern as English teachers upon written stories to include these other media in our teaching, our students will come to appreciate the fascinating medium that print can be. Moreover, we need to help students learn to tell their own stories in media other than writing. In the communications world that is emerging well educated students must be able to construct and deconstruct a wide variety of media.

Acknowledgments

Participants in the seminar: Dr. William Baillie, Dr. William Decker, Dr. Ervene Gulley, Dr. Christine Sperling, Dr. Gerald Strauss, and the Rev. Dr. Harry Swadling.

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